

On DVD

“Young Adult”

Flawed writer searches for love in wrong places



By Capt. Tristan Hinderliter



Charlize Theron is tremendous as the gorgeous but deeply troubled antihero of “Young Adult,” a dark comedy with a hard edge by director Jason Reitman. The screenplay was written by Academy Award-winner Diablo Cody, but fans of “Juno” beware: this is no quirky, light-hearted comedy. Cody’s brutally honest script pulls no punches.

Although unsympathetic, Theron is riveting as lead character Mavis Gary, a divorced 37-year-old writer of young adult fiction in Minneapolis, and her compelling performance carries the film.

Near the beginning of the movie, Mavis is alone in her apartment where she lives with her lapdog, chugging Diet Coke from a 2-liter bottle; it’s her beverage of choice when not drinking alcohol. As Mavis sorts through e-mail on her Apple laptop, one catches her eye, and sticks in her craw. It’s an invitation from an ex-boyfriend’s new wife to celebrate the birth of their daughter.

The ex-boyfriend is Buddy Slade (Patrick Wilson), who Mavis had dated in high school but had not spoken to in years.

“Can you imagine still living in Mercury, trapped with a wife and a kid and some crappy job?” she asks a friend at lunch. “It’s like he’s a hostage.”

So having decided Buddy must be miserable, with her dog in tow she sets off to her small Minnesota hometown, where Buddy still lives, with hopes of rekindling their romance.

Once in town, she gets down to the business of attempting to seduce Buddy from his wife, played by the charming Elizabeth Reaser. Along the way Mavis encounters a former classmate of theirs, Matt Freehauf (Patton Oswalt). Oswalt, an accomplished stand-up comedian, is excellent and understated in the role of Matt, a paunchy, good-natured, self-described “geek” who makes homemade bourbon in his garage. He walks with a crutch, the result of a vicious attack many years before that has left him with more than just physical scars.

It is Matt’s story and Mavis’s treatment of him that is the dark heart of the movie.

In between drinking binges and awkward encounters with former classmates (and estranged family members), Mavis is writing the last installment in a “Sweet Valley High” type young adult fiction series for which she is an uncredited ghostwriter. She lives vicariously through her fictional alter-ego, Kendal Strickland, as the character navigates circumstances resembling Mavis’s own.

It is through this narrative that we see the true extent of her narcissism. The amoral, uninhibited Mavis more closely resembles a character from a Bret Easton Ellis novel than one from the “Sweet Valley High” world of Francine Pascal she attempts to recreate.

As Mavis pushes harder to win back Buddy, things begin to spiral out of control.

Although the film is a solid dark comedy, it doesn’t have as many cringe-inducing moments as some of the classics of the genre, such as Neil LaBute’s “In the Company of Men,” or Peter Berg’s “Very Bad Things.” Still, though, there’s plenty here to laugh and wince at.

Ultimately, the movie is a character study of a woman grappling with her own flaws and compulsive behavior. While Mavis may sometimes fail in that effort, the film certainly succeeds.

“Young Adult” is rated R for language and adult situations.